

Nostalgic Wasatch Railroad

By DON SEARLE,
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The Heber Creeper jolts out of the station, sways around Deer Creek Reservoir and chugs down Provo Canyon into history.

Old-timers remember well when the "Creeper," then on the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad line, was the most advanced way to travel between Provo and Heber City.

Now, the weekend Creeper passenger may find himself staring down the barrel of a wicked-looking long rifle as a desperate gang of mountain men hold up the train. But nobody loses anything, since the desperadoes are really the Mountain Men of the Wasatch with their muzzle-loaders, performing for the guests.

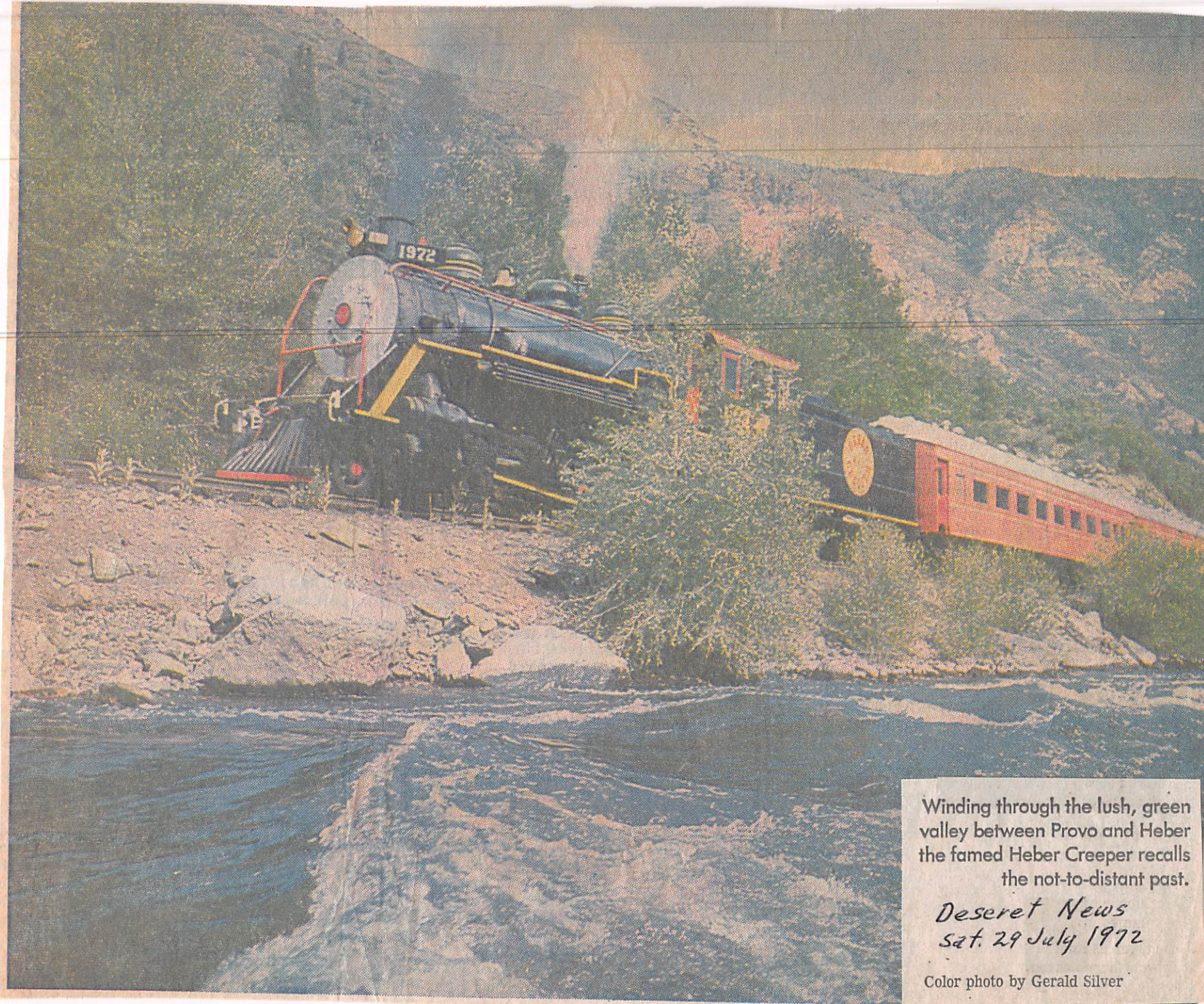
(As might be suspected, the robbery is really an inside job. Colorful conductor Bob Hatfield, in flowered vest, sideburns and riverboat gambler's hat, is really one of the Mountain Men; he and the rest of the crew sometimes put up token resistance with their blank-loaded sidearms.)

But the Creeper now has a few refinements the old D&RGW never thought of — like stewardesses. Twelve miniskirted misses dispense refreshments in a combine car that used to carry people, mail and baggage on the Union Pacific, but now provides passengers with a view while they sip cold drinks.

Winding through the lush, green valley between Provo and Heber the famed Heber Creeper recalls the not-to-distant past.

Deseret News
Sat. 29 July 1972

Color photo by Gerald Silver



Old boxcars have been converted to open-air coaches with chair seats and canopies. They're more popular than the enclosed cars and provide a better view.

A stroll around the Wasatch Mountain Railway yard to look at the line's other equipment is encounter with the living past. Old Engine No. 618 is one of only two "iron horses" left from what was once the Union Pacific's vast fleet. A coal-burner, it will be converted to burn diesel oil next year so it, like the line's other engines, can meet Utah's clean air standards.

No. 4 is a rare Shay engine, driven by a rack-and-pinion gear system down the right side, with a top speed of 12 miles per hour.

In the dining car that was once part of the Union Pacific's "City of Portland," one can almost hear the tinkle of glasses and soft padding of waiters in the aisles.

Wasatch Mountain Railway personnel are almost as mixed a bag as the line's equipment. Lowe Ashton, a Heber businessman, is the head of the company. Ed McLaughlin, sales manager and general ramrod, and a former commercial artist, oversees operations and "shops" the country for usable equipment. The stewardesses, rail gang and train crew are made up largely of students, retired persons and rail buffs. The line's chief engineer was once a television repairman; like many of the Heber Creeper personnel, he learned to be an engineer and work on rail equipment mostly by experience.

Heber physician Dr. Raymond Green sometimes stops during a Creeper run to chat with McLaughlin about the condition of the equipment and track; a Wasatch Mountain Railway stockholder, he often rides the lines with his family. Dr. Green says he was not a railroad buff "until I saw we were going to lose this thing."

There was indeed a battle to save the Creeper. It appeared for a while that the state highway department would remove the abandoned railroad tracks in Provo Canyon to build a freeway. But the road plans were stalled, and the state and rail line worked out an involved agreement under which Wasatch Mountain Railway leases the old tracks from Wasatch Mountain State Park.

Dr. Green, McLaughlin and the line's other backers have reason to be pleased with their investment. The Creeper paid all its bills last year when it hauled 26,000 people in a short season. The line charges \$4 for adults and \$2 for children under 12 for the 37-mile round trip to Bridal Veil Falls. Daily trips during the summer (except Tuesdays), and twice daily Saturdays, Sundays and holi-

days, with some 250 passengers per run, make the Creeper profitable.

Moreover, it's popular. An Englishman, after hearing about the Creeper in Spain ("Word of mouth advertising works best," McLaughlin commented), journeyed to Utah to ride. People call from all over the United States to find a out about the Creeper and make reservations.

Changes are in store as the Heber Creeper develops.

"Primarily, we would like to design this railroad around the turn of the century, McLaughlin explained. There are also plans to offer a night run with a night-club car, more trains, excursions for school groups, and package deals that may be attractive to future ski traffic in Heber valley.